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What's a Cellphilms?

Integrating mobile phone technology into participatory visual research and activism.

MacEntee, K., Burkholder, C. & Schwab-Cartas, J. (Eds)

Sense Publishers, Amsterdam, 2016, 219 pages.

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Reviewed by David Dennison, University of Central Lancashire.

'Cellphilms' are short video stories, often around 2 minutes long, filmed using the video facilities in mobile phones. This interesting and informative book gives a very good overview of current Cellphilms practice from a range of perspectives, dealing with issues around advocacy, participatory research methodologies, social engagement, pedagogy, dissemination, technologies and aesthetics.

Mobile phones have had suitable video facilities for a little more than a decade, so Cellphilms are a recent development. Having said that, a number of festivals have developed to celebrate cellphilms productions, including an International Short Films Festival in Spain, a Mobile Film Festival in France and the International Cellphilms Festival in Montreal, Canada. The latter festival is hosted by McGill University where the editors of this book are based.

More traditional video recording and editing technologies are technically demanding and expensive in a way that can exclude participants, or at least position the researcher as a 'powerful interlocutor' (8) creating an asymmetrical power relationship between researcher and community members. The authors reference Shannon Walsh's observation that restricted access to video technology (and the necessary knowledge and experience to use it) actually reinforces 'the hierarchical power dynamics that participatory visual research aims to change' (8). They maintain that cellphilming is a tool that can 'combat the assumption that marginalised individuals need an intermediary to tell their stories.' (8) Some readers will contrast this philosophy with the very different power relationships often established by western photojournalism. The central tenet of a more democratic access to production methods is reinforced throughout the book, largely through the many examples of cellphilms practice.

In many ways the philosophy of cellphilms is very similar to that of Digital Storytelling as exemplified by the Storycenter in the US (www.storycenter.com) and the work undertaken by BBC Wales in the UK (bbc.co.uk/wales/audiovideo/sites/galleries/pages/capturewales). There is, however, a much stronger emphasis on advocacy within the cellphilms genre and I highly recommend viewing the archive on the International Cellphilms Festival website: <https://internationalcellphilmsfestivalblog.wordpress.com/>. Most viewers will be impressed by the evocative power of some of these very brief productions. In fact the best aspect of this book for me was the wide range of references to interesting, engaging and effective cellphilms projects from different countries and cultures.

The book is divided into four parts, each containing between two and four chapters. Part 1, *Cellphilms from the professional to the personal*, contains four chapters that illustrate how cellphilms have been produced by communities as diverse as group of South African teachers (Mitchell, de Lange & Moletsane), a group of performers employed to represent Indigeneity in a South African safari park (Watson, Barnabas & Tomaselli), Zapotec campaigners in Mexico (Schwab-Cartas), and migrant sex workers in Hong Kong and the Netherlands (Lin). Many of the writers in this section emphasise the co-creation of productions that deliberately set out to counter the traditional 'observer-observed' (35) relationships often seen within research practices. In relation to participatory video production, one author sees cellphilming as a tactic to enhance our ability to tackle oppression' and celebrates the potentially positive effect of 'media self-determination' (38). Another author extols the benefits of cellphilming projects explore with groups the 'difference between seeing and looking' and 'training the eye to be critical' (57). This section also discusses the ubiquitous nature of widely available cellphones which can potentially lead to a very unobtrusive method of cellphilming.

Part 2, *Cellphilming as pedagogy*, comprises three chapters that discuss cellphilming as a learning method, with examples from grade 8 learners in Canada, technology classes in rural South Africa, and cellphilm practices used by education undergraduates in British Columbia. Each of these chapters explore the pedagogic potential of cellphilm projects, firstly in the context of new literacy practice: 'communicating through the strategic design of text, images, sound and movement' (88). Some readers may not be convinced by the assertion that framing and argument in an essay is the same as framing a photographic image, but in this chapter there is a very useful section on the six-step methodology the student were asked to follow in the execution of their projects (94). Another chapter looks at the potential for constructive cellphone use in learning situations and counsels against the unconditional prohibition of cellphones in classrooms. Consideration is also given to the relationship between content and pedagogical method in the classroom. The final chapter in this section emphasises the participatory aspect of cellphilm production as a 'bottom-up' paradigm (120) that proactively involves communities in an equitable attempt to hear their voices and stories, and acknowledges the nature of multiple voices, multiple perspectives and multiple truths.

Part 3, *Cellphilm dissemination and audiences*, discusses the potential conflicts that might arise when participant-produced cellphilms are screened and discussed at academic conferences, and situates this next to a discussion of participatory cellphilm production by ethnic minority young people in Hong Kong. Early in this section one of the authors cites research claiming that cellphilms can establish a better connection between producer and audience that do more traditional film-making practices (137), but balances this with the view that cellphilms focussed on a localised discussion may not be fully appreciated outside the communities in which they are created. The following author highlights the way in which cellphilming can prioritise the research process over the visual product (153), whilst also emphasising the value of curatorial practices in the creation of a digital archive, as exemplified by the *We are HK Too* YouTube channel (159).

Part 4, *Cellphilm technologies and aesthetics*, starts with a historical account of the cellphone as recording, video and communication device, particularly in relation to self-expression and documentation (171). This is interesting enough, but the following chapter by Mandrona looks at cellphilm production from a more aesthetic perspective and raises a number of important issues. In fact ethics, as most practitioners would understand the term, is not discussed in depth, but the author makes some engaging points about the social and cultural contexts of production. She discusses the elaborate but unwritten codes of behaviour that can govern the actions of young females on social media (185), and suggests that this may influence the way in which this community might view the aesthetics of cellphilm production. She rightly claims that cellphilm practice encompasses research practice, documentation, creative expression and citizen journalism, and reminds us of the power of the moving image with that sobering quote from Dexter Strong: 'Black Lives Matter ... but only if captured on camera ...' (192).

The final chapter, *Where do we go from here*, is structured around a 'polyvocal narrative reflection' (200) by the editors as they consider their collaboration on the completed volume. The discussion ends with a particularly relevant point, not referred to directly by any of the contributors:

'How might knowledge produced through the cellphilm process be protected from real life political consequences?' (207)

'What are the ethics of engaging in [democratising] cellphilm methods in non-democratic political contexts?' (207)

Good questions indeed – I look forward to their next book.